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### Deposited in DRO:

22 September 2021

### Version of attached file:

Published Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Unknown

### Citation for published item:

Banks, Sarah (2020) 'Practising During Pandemic Conditions: Ethical Guidance for Social Workers.', Project Report. International Federation of Social Workers.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<https://www.ifsw.org/practising-during-pandemic-conditions-ethical-guidance-for-social-workers/>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

### Additional information:

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SOCIAL WORK  
RESPONDS  
TO COVID-19

INFORMATION FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

# PRACTISING DURING PANDEMIC CONDITIONS: ETHICAL GUIDANCE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

**The International Federation of Social Workers**

## Imprint

Published by The International Federation of Social Workers  
Maiengässli 4, 4310 Rheinfelden, Switzerland

Cover Design & Layout: Pascal Rudin  
10 November 2020

Web: [www.ifsw.org](http://www.ifsw.org)  
Email: [global@ifsw.org](mailto:global@ifsw.org)

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# Practising during pandemic conditions: Ethical guidance for social workers

## INTRODUCTION

This guidance is designed to complement two publications by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW): *Global Statement of Ethical Principles* (IFSW, 2018) and *Ethical decision-making in the face of Covid-19* (IFSW, 2020). It should also be used alongside national codes of ethics for social work, and national laws, policies and guidelines relevant to social work generally and under Covid-19 in particular.

### **Social work as a value-based profession**

Social work is a value-based profession, whose practitioners have a commitment to promoting human rights and social justice. Ethical challenges are expected, as social workers work with people facing difficult life-circumstances and have to prioritise the conflicting needs and rights of different individuals, groups and the general public. They also have to negotiate sometimes contradictory roles as carers, controllers, advocates, and educators. Ethical challenges occur when social workers face difficult decisions requiring them to weigh the relative harms, benefits, rights, and responsibilities of different approaches and actions in relation to the people with whom they work. The IFSW global statement of ethical principles outlines a generic framework of commitments and behaviours expected of social workers worldwide based on fundamental values of human rights, social justice, and professional integrity. Codes of ethics developed by national associations of social workers provide more detail about how these principles should be put into practice in their own countries.

## **The purpose of this guidance**

The guidance offered here is intended to assist social workers in thinking through the specific ethical challenges that arise whilst practising during a pandemic or other type of crisis. In crisis conditions, people who need social work services, and social workers themselves, face increased and unusual risks. These challenging conditions are further compounded by scarce or reallocated governmental and social resources. While the ethical principles underpinning social work remain unchanged by crises, unique and evolving circumstances may demand that they be prioritised differently. A decision or action that might be regarded as ethically wrong in 'normal' times, may be judged to be right in a time of crisis. Examples include: prioritising individual and public health considerations by restricting people's freedom of movement; not consulting people about treatment and services; or avoiding face-to-face meetings.

## **How the guidance was developed**

This guidance has been compiled by a research partnership working with IFSW, drawing on a study conducted during May 2020 with 607 social workers from across the world (Banks et al, 2020). The focus of the research was on the ethical challenges raised by the Covid-19 pandemic. It captured a snapshot of the conditions in different countries, which were at different stages of the pandemic and had adopted varied government and social work responses. The nature of the pandemic and national and international responses to it are constantly changing, meaning that social workers, their employers, and indeed all citizens, are continually required to rethink the ways they go about their lives and work. On the one hand, this gives incentives and opportunities for creative and novel practices to emerge. On the other hand, the pandemic also presents dangers that defensive, distanced, or restrictive practices remain in place for too long and at great ethical cost to social workers' integrity and the dignity and rights of people using services.

## **The structure of the guidance**

The research findings revealed six themes relating to the ethical challenges faced by social workers, which are used to structure this guidance. In summary, these are:

- the implications for service delivery of using communication technology and personal protective equipment;
- prioritizing services and resources;
- balancing the needs and rights of different people;
- relying on formal policies and procedures versus individual professional discretion;
- balancing personal needs and emotions with service to others;
- the need to learn from the pandemic and rethink social work in the future.

This document describes the ethical challenges faced by social workers under each of these headings, before offering some guidance for ethical practice.

Underpinning these challenges is a need to be able to make difficult, and sometimes quick, decisions in situations of crisis and uncertainty. Before giving guidance under each of the six headings, we briefly discuss the nature of ethical decision-making to help social workers think through difficult situations.

## ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

There is a robust body of literature on the processes for reflecting on and resolving ethical problems and dilemmas. Though the form and priorities vary among models, most involve the consideration of values, ethical principles, regulations, and situational circumstances in weighing various alternative choices. Rarely is the result a commonly accepted and clearly defined path: the process and result of decision making is contextual — involving reflection, rational and emotional reactions, external pressures and priorities, and professional obligations. Because the ethical challenges that emerge in practice may not allow for protracted deliberations, social workers must be well-prepared to respond appropriately in demanding, emergent, and unpredictable situations. The ethical decision-making process can be employed in considering how to respond to an evolving situation or in reflecting on and evaluating the wisdom of a choice made without benefit of prior deliberation. Common elements of sound ethical decision-making are shown in the box overleaf, which serve as a foundation for tackling the ethical challenges described in the guidance.

1. **Clarify the nature of the ethical challenge.** What roles, principles, or obligations are in conflict? For example, during pandemic conditions, a challenge is which to prioritize: service responsibilities or the personal safety of the worker.
2. **Generate options.** Sometimes in a crisis it can seem that social workers are stuck between several undesirable choices. Reflection and consultation can help to reveal other alternatives or strategies to mitigate the potential for harm. For example, during times and in locations when meeting other people in person is severely restricted, social workers who decide to risk personal safety to assist others with dire needs might do so by wearing personal protective equipment and leaving necessary food and supplies outside people's doors, thus limiting riskier face-to-face contact.
3. **Refer to ethical guidance.** Not all options for action may be ethically sound. Consulting ethical codes, laws, policies, and other guiding documents will highlight and support some options over others. During pandemic conditions, ethical principles and standards relating to conflicts of interest and service to others are relevant for social workers who have to weigh their self-care against service users' needs.
4. **Draw on resources and experience.** The burden of ethical decision-making is eased when social workers confer with colleagues, supervisors, or people with particular expertise and draw on their own practice wisdom. These conversations and reflections provide new perspectives and backing for options and action steps. They allow social workers to express emotions and receive support as well as guidance. Seeking expertise from colleagues in health and public safety, finding or developing alternative services, and getting access to adequate protective equipment will inform social workers' strategies to meet community needs during pandemic conditions.
5. **Evaluate outcomes.** Processing the decision through the lens of an ethical framework, personal reflection, discussion with colleagues, or conversation with service users helps to build social workers' ethical competence and inform future decisions. As such, a social worker might ask:
  - "Did the situation turn out as I had hoped?"
  - "If it did not, is there anything I can do now to remediate the situation?"
  - "Is there any option I overlooked or wish I had done differently?"
  - "Were ethical principles well-served by my actions?"



## **GUIDANCE FOR TACKLING ETHICAL CHALLENGES**

### **1 Creating and maintaining trusting, honest and empathic relationships via phone or internet with due regard to privacy and confidentiality, or in person with protective equipment**

#### *Overview of the challenges*

The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), including phone, email, video-conferencing, and online assessment, is increasingly common in certain fields of social work in some countries, often used in conjunction with face-to-face communication. During pandemic conditions, when face-to-face contact is limited or prohibited, the use of ICT may replace in-person contact between social workers and service users. Either or both parties may be unused to this means of communication and may not be adequately prepared or resourced. In emergency situations or when service users do not have access to ICT, or the skills or inclination to use it, then face-to-face meetings may have to take place with all participants using personal protective equipment and/or keeping at a suitable physical distance. The ethical challenges created by these conditions include:

- People without access to the technology or skills to use it, or those who lose contact, may be unable to access services.
- Threats to privacy from home-based ICT systems, which may not be reliable or secure.
- Difficulties in ensuring privacy and confidentiality when conversations may be overheard by other members of the households of service users or social workers.
- Difficulties in making fair assessments of service users' needs and living conditions without being able to move freely through a house, or see and sense non-verbal gestures.
- Difficulties in creating empathy and building trusting relationships, especially with people accessing services for the first time.
- Problems in maintaining boundaries between personal and professional life, as service users may regard the use of ICT as a more informal means of communication, particularly if a social worker is working from home.
- If face-to-face meetings occur, the use of face masks and physical distancing may inhibit relationships and be off-putting or frightening for some service users at stressful times in their lives.

### *Guidance for ethical practice*

It is important that social workers:

1. Develop competence in the use of appropriate ICT systems, are familiar with employers' policies and security systems and proactively seek support and training as required.
2. Explain the benefits and limitations of different means of communication, and support service users to use ICT as securely and privately as possible.
3. Discuss with service users their preferred methods of communication and try to use these when feasible, to help maintain autonomy and trust.
4. Remain aware of professional boundaries when working from their own homes and when having to use less secure methods of communication, such as social media, in order to reach service users.
5. Discuss the boundaries of the relationship with service users, explaining the social work role in the current context and how confidentiality will be handled.
6. Consider the risks of face-to-face visits and the benefits of personal protective equipment for service users and their families, social workers themselves and their contacts, balancing the desire for empathy and expressions of care with risks to health.

## **2 Prioritising service user needs and demands, which are greater and different due to pandemic conditions, when resources are stretched or unavailable and full assessments often impossible**

### *Overview of the challenges*

During pandemic and other crisis conditions, social workers are often caught between their own needs and those of socially disadvantaged groups. Crisis conditions, such as those experienced during a pandemic, both increase service users' needs and limit the resources and strategies that social workers can use to support them. Unemployment, family conflict and violence, food and housing insecurity, and health and mental health crises may escalate at the same time that social workers face the personal effects of the crisis and the restrictions on the services that could otherwise be deployed to meet these needs. There are practical issues about how risk can be assessed and

managed, how priorities can be established within constraints of reduced contact, and how social workers balance the wellbeing of themselves and their families with the stark and mounting needs of the already vulnerable populations they are dedicated to serve. Some of the specific ethical challenges include:

- Problems in equitably distributing scarce materials or resources, such as services, food and protective equipment.
- Conflicts of interest between the needs of social workers and service users, and among various vulnerable groups.
- Fear of failing adequately to identify and respond to risky situations, such as frail or home-bound people, child welfare, or family violence.
- Uncertainty about the readiness of professional colleagues, non-professional staff or volunteers to address surging demand for services.
- Fear of exacerbating social inequality, including racial discrimination, in the distribution of scarce resources or limited care.
- Dilemmas for social workers in deciding whether or not to utilize their own personal resources to support service users' needs.

#### *Guidance for ethical practice*

It is important that social workers:

1. Work with colleagues, including those in health and other professions, to formulate common guidelines and practices for equitable and respectful service provision in crisis situations.
2. Use supervision and consultation to operationalize service priorities, identify alternative resources and consider what are the fairest ways of working.
3. Be aware of personal self-care, safety, and vulnerability, and seek consultation or therapeutic assistance regarding how ethically and effectively to balance personal needs and those of service users.
4. Maintain regular contact with service users, including by phone or online platform, identifying and taking action in relation to situations in which contact is not possible, risk is extreme, or resources are insufficient.
5. Proactively report problems when resources are insufficient and people who are in need cannot be reached.

### **3 Balancing service user rights, needs and risks against personal risk to social workers and others, in order to provide services as well as possible**

#### *Overview of the challenges*

Much social work is traditionally centred around face-to-face contact between social workers and individuals, groups and communities. During pandemic conditions, social workers and their employers have to make difficult ethical decisions about whether to continue face-to-face work, including whether to close or restrict access to offices, service centres, refuges or shelters. In institutional (including residential) settings, some people's freedom of movement and reception of visitors may be limited to prevent harm to themselves or others. This may be especially difficult if service users or their families do not fully understand or accept the reasons, are terminally ill, or may be feeling stressed or lonely. On some occasions, social workers may be asked to undertake face-to-face work in conditions regarded as risky for all involved. At other times social workers may judge that face-to-face contact is necessary and be prepared to take a risk (for example, for urgent removal of children, fostering, adoption, admission to psychiatric hospital, or checking on very vulnerable people). The ethical challenges in these situations include:

- Having to assess risks in situations of extreme uncertainty, outside usual risk assessment frameworks, where little evidence currently exists and government and expert guidance may be constantly changing and disputed.
- Fear of unintentionally transmitting the virus to service users and others due to inadequate risk assessments.
- Making ethical decisions that involve considering the sometimes conflicting rights, needs, and interests of many more people than usual, including social workers themselves, their families and colleagues, and the general public.
- Deciding whether and how much to infringe upon people's usual rights to freedom of movement or participation in decision-making in order to safeguard themselves and others in unusual circumstances.

### *Guidance for ethical practice*

It is important that social workers:

1. Take time to assess as comprehensively as possible the needs, rights, and interests of people who use services, ensuring that assessments are balanced, and social workers place the best interests of service users at the heart of their practice.
2. Advocate for the rights of social workers to be provided with adequate personal protective equipment, especially when physical contact is involved in service delivery.
3. Explore how services can be transformed to fit new conditions and what protective measures can be taken, to ensure that service users' rights and needs are met as well as possible.
4. Consider carefully both their professional obligations and their personal rights to protection, and understand that there may be situations in which they are not compelled to act when this would put themselves or their families at risk.
5. Seek reflective supervision to help them to analyze their practice critically, examining their decision-making processes and how they assess outcomes for themselves and service users.

### **4 Deciding whether to follow national and organisational policies, procedures and guidance (existing or new), or to use professional discretion in circumstances where the policies seem inappropriate, confusing, or lacking**

#### *Overview of the challenges*

Many organizational policies and national legal requirements may be suspended or changed during pandemic or other crisis conditions. Some social workers may be categorized as essential workers and required to continue providing home or hospital services. Others may receive stay-at-home orders with or without continuing (remote) contact with current or potential service users. Unexpected crises may catch many organizations and jurisdictions off guard, leading to ambiguous, irrelevant or shifting rules and expectations. The resulting dilemmas challenge the ethical principles underpinning professional practice, as social workers strive to follow existing and emerging procedures,

while honouring their own professional integrity and judgment. The ethical challenges in these circumstances include:

- The paradox of practising 'socially distanced social work' in a profession built on relationship-based foundations. For example, social workers may have to decide whether to continue to carry out home, hospital, and care home visiting, in the light of public health advice.
- Discomfort with directives from managers and senior leaders that contradict ethically informed decision-making and fail to account for pressing human needs.
- Deciding (in the isolating conditions of work from home) whether to follow frustrating, contradictory, or even erroneous guidance; and deciding when and how to protest, challenge, or disobey policies or regulations.
- In cases where already marginalized and vulnerable people are further disadvantaged by the withdrawal of existing services and other detrimental policies, determining whether to use professional discretion to fulfil social work's commitment to social justice.

#### *Guidance for ethical practice*

It is important that social workers:

1. Take time to think carefully about the implications of the rules or procedures they are asked or expected to follow and what the implications are for the rights, needs, dignity and safety of everyone involved.
2. Constructively challenge rules or requests that appear to infringe upon the key ethical principles of social work, particularly when human rights and dignity are at stake.
3. Work with colleagues and others to develop and recommend different, solution-focused approaches to mobilise themselves and resources in new ways.
4. Are prepared to use professional discretion in responding to ethically challenging situations, ideally in consultation with supervisors and colleagues, ensuring that they can justify what they have done and why.
5. Are responsible and accountable for the ethically-informed decisions they make, particularly if they judge it necessary to act in ways that contradict legal requirements or agency protocols.

## 5 Acknowledging and handling emotions, fatigue and the need for self-care, when working in unsafe and stressful circumstances

### *Overview of the challenges*

Pandemic and crisis conditions give rise to a wide array of painful emotions, like helplessness, anger, grief, guilt, anxiety, fear, shame, sadness, and disappointment on the part of social workers and those with whom they work. While resilience, perseverance, pride, and other positive emotions are associated with successful services or contributions to society, workers may also experience emotional and physical stress, exhaustion, and compassion fatigue. Some may even appear to suffer from 'moral injury' – caused by having to take action that damages their sense of their moral selves (for example, being involved in the discharge of hospital patients to unsafe home conditions). These emotional challenges are often exacerbated by precarious personal or home circumstances, diminished collegial and organisational support, and the lack of recognition for their work. The ethical challenges include:

- Pressure on social workers as they deal with negative and contradictory emotions, while taking care of themselves, their kin, their colleagues, and the profession as a whole.
- How to maintain professional competence and integrity, and deal with distressing situations in a professional manner.
- Being able to recognise when personal reactions cloud judgement and hinder self-regulation, or when they offer critical insights about problems, priorities, and renewed motivation.

### *Guidance for ethical practice*

It is important that social workers:

1. Respect and express their own professional and ethical integrity, including guarding their personal boundaries, regulating the balance between work and private life, and remaining vigilant about their personal and emotional involvement in professional activities.
2. Are proactive in taking care of their own wellbeing, acknowledging the emotional and physical toll exacted by extreme conditions, and recognising the need to reduce the impact of stress on their ability to deliver services effectively and ethically.

3. Weigh rational considerations and emotional impulses in assessing and determining appropriate reactions to extenuating circumstances.
4. Be attentive to co-workers in need of emotional support or assistance with ethical, practical, or personal challenges.
5. Demand, promote and participate in organizational practices that support social workers in maintaining their ethical integrity, morale and wellbeing.

## **6 Using the lessons learned from working during pandemic or crisis conditions to rethink social work in the future**

### *Overview of the challenges*

Pandemic and crisis situations expose and amplify existing social and health inequalities and gaps in services. People in already precarious and vulnerable circumstances find themselves facing poverty, unemployment, stress, illness, oppressive practices and fewer resources and services. These conditions call for even greater commitment and creativity from social workers and other professionals, civil society organisations, neighbours and families. They also highlight the crucial part played by social workers in working with the social, psychological and household-level economic impacts of crises, and the need for greater respect and visibility for the role of social work. Social workers have a critical function in community service and development work, particularly in supporting community-based and voluntary support networks in neighbourhoods and communities of interest and identity. Pandemic conditions provide an opportunity to reflect on the nature and practice of social work, how the profession might be better prepared for similar situations in the future and might regain its professional confidence. Some of the ethical challenges created by these conditions include:

- The urgency of crisis situations makes it difficult to find time for ethical reflection or dialogue with colleagues.
- There are limited resources and time to research new ways of working and consider evidence of what works and is ethically acceptable.
- Prioritising health needs means that social needs and the crucial role of social workers in understanding people's lived experiences may be undervalued or overshadowed.
- There is a danger that regimes of rationing, and digital and remote working may continue into 'normal' times resulting in indignity and unfairness for service users.



### *Guidance for ethical practice*

It is important that social workers:

1. Revisit the ethical values and principles outlined in the international statement of ethical principles and national codes of ethics. These values and principles remain constant, but how they are applied in practice may change in new circumstances.
2. Discuss ethical dilemmas and challenges with colleagues or professional associations, gaining different perspectives on possible decisions and talking through options for action.
3. Take time to reflect individually, and with colleagues, to learn from experiences of working during pandemic conditions, scanning practice environments to consider how these can be reshaped to reflect the values and mission of the social work profession.
4. Engage in reflective processes of ethical deliberation to work out what might be the right (although difficult) action, taking time to consider what social work values and principles are at stake before deciding what to do in a particular situation. Consider if a decision that might be ethically right in normal times (for example, prioritising service user choice or confidentiality), might now be regarded as ethically wrong (since heightened risk means principles of service user welfare or the public good have to come first).
5. Raise with employers, professional associations and policymakers the serious harm and inequity experienced by people during pandemic and crisis conditions, the difficulties in delivering social work services and make proposals for improvements.
6. Advocate for the critical role played by social workers in providing and supporting social and community-based care, which is as vital as health care in enabling individuals, families and communities to function during a pandemic.

### **CONCLUSION**

While the Covid-19 pandemic is unprecedented in its scope and effects, it is safe to assume that global social work practice will always be confronted with novel and vexing crises of one form or another. The guidance engendered by the virus in 2020 can be instructive for tackling ethical challenges in future crisis situations, including environmental disasters and armed conflict. Professional associations, employers, social work educators and social

workers themselves must also be prepared collectively to rethink how to apply professional values and principles in new contexts. All those involved in social work need to take time to examine critically the full ethical implications of digital working, new types of risk assessments, and the reconfiguring of welfare provision in the context of the exacerbation of the inequities experienced by people who use or need social work services.

It is not easy to make ethical decisions in times of crisis and uncertainty. Yet it is even more important that social workers are able to stop, reflect, discuss and take stock of the ethical implications of different courses of action. This guidance cannot provide answers to specific ethical dilemmas or problems. However, it does offer some pointers towards what factors to consider in social workers' everyday struggles to act fairly, compassionately and respectfully and to work for changes in policies, practices and attitudes both in their local contexts and worldwide.

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## FURTHER RESOURCES

For further resources on working during Covid-19 and other crises, see [www.ifsw.org/covid-19](http://www.ifsw.org/covid-19)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

IFSW is grateful to all the social workers who responded to the survey on ethical challenges, upon which this guidance draws.

The guide was compiled by the Social Work Ethics Research Partnership, based on research with IFSW during May 2020. Members of the partnership are: Sarah Banks, Tian Cai, Ed de Jonge, Jane Shears, Michelle Shum, Ana M. Sobočan, Kim Strom, Rory Truell, Maria J. Úriz and Merlinda Weinberg. Additional contributions were made by Dawn Hobdy of the IFSW Ethics Commission.

The project was funded by Durham University, UK, through the Economic and Social Research Council Impact Acceleration Account, and coordinated by Sarah Banks.

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